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# HENRY JAMES AND IBSEN

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ONLY RECENTLY has the probable influence of Ibsen on the technique of Henry James's later period become a subject of scholarly interest. In 1943 Austin Warren commented upon the probable influence of Ibsen in the novels of the final period with respect to their tight technique and their symbolism.<sup>1</sup> In 1947, in his introduction to *The Other House*, Leon Edel, after pointing out James's extensive knowledge of Ibsen, showed the similarities in technique and content between Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and *Rosmersholm* and *The Other House*. Edel extended his comparison, in more general terms, to *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew*, stating: "Without seeking to push too far the question of 'influence,' we may say definitely that some of the passion and intensity, the *quality* of Ibsen's plays was carried over into these works of James's; they bear little resemblance to the earlier, more spacious *Bostonians*, *Princess Casamassima* and *Tragic Muse*, which preceded the dramatic years."<sup>2</sup> In 1949, Francis Fergusson, after calling attention to the fact that James's comments on Ibsen "are at once the most sympathetic and the most objective that have been written," stated that James "shared Ibsen's ethical preoccupation and his strict sense of form."<sup>3</sup> In *PMLA* for June, 1951, Daniel Lerner and Oscar Cargill, primarily concerned with showing the influence of Greek tragedy on James, admit the influence of Ibsen, and conclude: "He knew more than Hawthorne, Eliot, Turgenev, Balzac, Daudet, and other French realists. He knew Ibsen, and he knew the Greeks" (p. 331). It is in the hope of extending somewhat the conclusions of the scholars cited above that the present essay is written. It is not my intention to imply that Ibsen was the only influence on the technique of James's later period, but rather to suggest that Ibsen's influence was perhaps larger than has previously been realized.

<sup>1</sup> Austin Warren, "Myth and Dialectic in the Later Novels," *Kenyon Review*, V, 551-568 (Autumn, 1943).

<sup>2</sup> *The Other House*, ed. Leon Edel (Norfolk, Conn., 1948), p. xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theatre* (Princeton, 1949), p. 158.

## I

There is no definite information as to when James first read Ibsen after the William Archer translations of 1888, or whether he saw the first English production of *A Doll's House* on June 7, 1889, but Allan Wade in *The Scenic Art* quotes a letter from James to Edmund Gosse, written on January 29, 1889, in which James asks for more information about Ibsen.<sup>4</sup> But beginning with 1891, when the full storm of the Ibsen controversy burst upon England, there is abundant evidence of James's interest in Ibsen. On January 27, 1891, he accompanied Genevieve Ward to Terry's Theater to see *A Doll's House* and was introduced to Elizabeth Robins, then playing the part of Mrs. Linden, and soon to become the leading Ibsen actress of the English stage. Elizabeth Robins, who was later to create the part of Claire in James's *The American*, became one of James's closest women friends, and from then on he seldom missed an Ibsen production. Elizabeth Robins tells us that on the night they first met, she heard James advise Mrs. Hugh Bell to read *Hedda Gabler* "for its convincing life."<sup>5</sup> From then on began the long series of James's evenings with Elizabeth Robins, during which she read Ibsen's plays to him, sometimes, as with *The Master Builder* in November of 1892, in the form of a newly arrived script, fresh from the pen of Ibsen himself.<sup>6</sup> James, according to Elizabeth Robins, was fascinated by Ibsen's plays, and at times, as in the case of *The Master Builder*, saw two performances a week. He wrote to her: "I shan't see the M. B. again today, but I expect to tomorrow or at furthest Thursday," and he marveled at the play's "hold, the odd, baffling spell it works."<sup>7</sup>

Criticism of Ibsen's plays by James soon began to appear in English periodicals, and between 1891 and 1897 he wrote four articles on Ibsen. This criticism is notable for its brief dismissal of the contemporary controversy, its tacit assumption that the "Ibsenites" had seized upon the ephemeral in Ibsen to the exclusion of Ibsen the dramatic poet, its quiet insistence that Ibsen was not a great social reformer, nor a great thinker, but a great dramatic artist whose new dramatic technique "has cleared up the air we breathe and set a

<sup>4</sup> *The Scenic Art*, ed. Allan Wade (New Brunswick, 1948), p. 256.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Robins, *Theatre and Friendship* (New York, 1932), p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72 ff.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

copy for our renouncement; has made many things wonderfully plain and quite mapped out the prospect."<sup>8</sup> In these essays, as they are reprinted by Allan Wade in *The Scenic Art*, James's emphasis rests upon Ibsen the dramatic artist almost entirely: of *Hedda Gabler* he says, "we have stood in the presence of a work of art" (p. 244); he speaks of Ibsen's "perfect practice of a difficult and delicate art" (p. 248); and of his "rare mastery of form" (p. 293). Ibsen, James says, takes that supposedly undramatic thing, "the picture not of an action but of a condition . . . the portrait of a nature . . . an *état d'âme*, and of a state of nerves as well as of soul . . ." and makes this static material "live with an intensity of life" (pp. 250-251).

Two aspects of Ibsen's technique particularly impressed James: its "admirable closeness, the dense complexity of its moral cross references" (p. 252), and Ibsen's retrospective technique, by which, in the case of *Hedda Gabler*, "we receive Hedda ripe for her catastrophe, and if we ask for antecedents and explanations we must simply find them in her character. Her motives are just her passions. What the four acts show us is these motives and that character—complicated, strange, irreconcilable, infernal—playing themselves out" (p. 251). Here, then, in Ibsen's new technique, was not only the elimination of the old preliminary exposition, but, with its absence of asides and monologues, its self-lighted quality, was that absolute objectivity which James had long sought in his novels, and towards which at this time he had made substantial progress, but which was not to crystallize in its final form until after his five-year "dramatic interlude." Here, too, was that closely wrought, tightly woven artistry towards which James had always striven, but which he was not fully to realize in his novels until after he had discovered "the divine principle of the scenario." James at this time shows a little uncertainty about Ibsen's elimination of the old-fashioned preliminary exposition in *Hedda Gabler*, but, on the whole, he approves this aspect of Ibsen's retrospective technique, which, later, he too was to adopt, beginning with *The Other House* and *The Spoils of Poynton*. He says:

Something might have been gained, entailing perhaps a loss in another direction, by tracing the preliminary stages, showing the steps in Mrs.

<sup>8</sup> *Scenic Art*, p. 243.

Tesman's history which led to the spasm, as it were, on which the curtain rises and of which the breathless duration—ending in death—is the period of the piece. But a play is above everything a work of selection, and Ibsen, with his curious and beautiful passion for the unity of time (carried in him to a point which almost always implies also that of place), condemns himself to admirable rigors. (p. 251)

That James should have concerned himself primarily with problems of technique was characteristic. As F. O. Matthiessen remarked: "H. J. as a critic was always concerned with method, declaring that questions of method are 'the noblest speculations that can engage the human mind.'"<sup>9</sup> The *Notebooks* as well as his critical writings testify to this characteristic of James. In this connection, Cornelia P. Kelley, in her *Early Development of Henry James*, establishes the interesting fact that when James studied the works of an author and wrote criticism based on the study, James's primary aim was not the critical article but the acquisition of method which he might use in his constant experimentation with novelistic technique. Cornelia Kelley's work ends with *The Portrait of a Lady* and does not embrace the later period, but she shows how this procedure operated in the case of Balzac, George Eliot, Flaubert, Turgenev, and others. That was true with respect to his earliest reading, Hawthorne, F. O. Matthiessen has pointed out in his *American Renaissance*. And Lyon N. Richardson, in his introduction to the volume on Henry James in the American Writers Series, states that James's critical articles are not only "original, carefully-studied contributions to the field of literary comment," but "served James in forming a sense of values and in establishing criteria to guide him in his own writing of fiction" (p. xxvii). The remarkably few parallels with the work of other authors with respect to situation, character, and theme that have been found in James (chiefly the resemblance of *Washington Square* to *Eugénie Grandet* pointed out by Cornelia Kelley, and that of *The Princess Casamassima* to Turgenev's *Virgin Soil* by Robert Kane)<sup>10</sup> is testimony to the fact that the influence of other writers on James was largely in the realm of technique. And the technique of others went through such a complex process of transformation that it is often possible to discuss it only in general terms.

<sup>9</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family* (New York, 1947), p. 426.

<sup>10</sup> *Gifthouse*, Ohio State University (Columbus, 1949), pp. 25-29.

## II

The problem of the possible influence of Ibsen on James in the novels of his final period is of course closely bound up with the influence of the drama in general on the technique of the last period. Some would say inextricably bound up. It is generally admitted that James's final technique first manifests itself in full maturity in *The Spoils of Poynton* in 1896, which, with *The Other House*, was his first novel to be written following the five-year period, beginning in 1891, that he had devoted to the writing of stage plays. It is likewise generally admitted that this five-year "dramatic interlude" exercised a pronounced influence upon the technique of his final period. As Edel says: "It was only after these years that he applied the scenic method with complete and conscious consistency."<sup>11</sup> And Matthiessen refers to the dramatic period as "an experiment which bore the most valuable consequences for his later development."<sup>12</sup> Beach states that "the totally different system of communication of facts"<sup>13</sup> which characterizes the later method, began, in its mature form, with *The Spoils of Poynton*, "the type and classic instance of the 'scenic' method in fiction."<sup>14</sup>

Actually, as Beach has shown, James had experimented with dramatic technique in fiction previous to 1880—Beach cites *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) as an example of the earlier dramatic method—and as James said in the Preface to *The Tragic Muse*, "The charm of the scenic consistency . . . had haunted the author of 'The Tragic Muse' from far back," and "to put himself at any rate as much as possible under the protection of it had ever been his practice . . ." (p. xv). So we must keep in mind in discussing the "new" dramatic technique of his final period that it was actually the final development, the crystallization, of previous experimentation. But that the full development did not take place until immediately after the dramatic interlude of 1891-1895 seems now generally to be granted, and indeed is evidenced by the *Notebooks*. On December 21, 1896, James recorded: "I realize—none too soon—that the scenic method is my absolute, my *only* salvation" . . . and he adds, "How read-

<sup>11</sup> *The Complete Plays of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (New York, 1950), p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *Henry James, The Major Phase* (New York, 1944), p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Warren Beach, *The Twentieth Century Novel* (New York, 1932), p. 195.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Warren Beach, *The Method of Henry James* (New Haven, 1918), p. 96.

ing Ibsen's splendid *John Gabriel* a day or two ago (in proof) brought that, finally and forever, home to me!"<sup>15</sup>

The majority of James scholars seem to be in essential agreement with Matthiessen and Murdock when they state that the final technique came "from his own experience in writing plays"<sup>16</sup> during the dramatic interlude. Edel speaks of "his wresting from his failures a final and major victory, finding in the scenic method . . . those discoveries which mark him out as one of the great architects of the modern novel,"<sup>17</sup> and this statement likewise represents the views of Pelham Edgar.<sup>18</sup> At first glance it may seem as if the only dramatic technique which James practiced during his period as an active playwright was that of the French well-made play. It might even seem, since he employed it largely in nearly all the plays he wrote during this period, that the Dumas-Scribe-Sardou technique was the only one he really esteemed. For despite his critical enthusiasm for Ibsen noted above, he wrote only one "Ibsen" play, *The Other House*, during the dramatic interlude. In fact, it was James's persistent practice of "Sardoudledom" that, in the opinion of some authorities, was partly responsible for his failure as a dramatist. Edel in his introduction to James's plays speaks of his "conformity to standards accepted from the French," which "unfortunately pinned him down,"<sup>19</sup> and holds this bondage primarily responsible for the failure of James's *magnum opus*, *Guy Domville*: "In forsaking the simplicity of the first act Henry James had yielded to the clap-trap of artificial drama, to the *ficelle* structure of Sardou and the dramatists he had studied with such assiduity at the Théâtre Français."<sup>20</sup> After the failure of James's plays, William Archer said that if James would "write solely for the audience within his own breast, he will certainly produce works of art and not improbably successful plays,"<sup>21</sup> and Harley Granville-Barker said that it was unfortunate that James had derived his ideas of dramatic technique from one of the worst periods of the French theater.

<sup>15</sup> *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York, 1947), p. 263.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>17</sup> Edel, *Complete Plays*, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> Pelham Edgar, *Henry James, Man and Author* (Toronto, 1927), p. 298.

<sup>19</sup> Edel, *Complete Plays*, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 473.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Edel, *ibid.*, p. 346.

The fact is, as the *Notebooks* prove, that at the time James was employing the artificial technique of the French well-made play he held it in contempt. As early as 1889, when he was dramatizing *The American*, he wrote: "Oh how it must not be too good and how very bad it must be! A moi, Scribe; à moi Sardou; à moi Dennery!"<sup>22</sup> The explanation of why he persisted in using a factitious technique he held in such low esteem probably lies in the condescending attitude he had assumed towards the theater from the beginning, the feeling that "this was the sort of thing they probably would like." The scenario of his Ibsenesque play had been immediately rejected by the only English manager to whom he had shown it, and certainly the few Ibsen plays staged in England in the nineties had not achieved popularity. James, moreover, in his earliest review of an Ibsen play, that of *Hedda Gabler* in 1891, had despaired of Ibsen's ever achieving popularity. And it was the hope of gaining popular success—and the money that accompanied it—that had induced James to take up the "unholy trade" of dramatist in the first place. Beginning with an early enthusiasm for the French school—in 1878 he had written William, "I have thoroughly mastered Dumas, Augier and Sardou"—he had lost his illusions about it by 1889, even though Dumas *filis* always had a sentimental fascination for him.

When James abandoned "the most unholy trade" and at the same time, we may assume, abandoned all hopes of popularity, determined henceforth to devote himself exclusively to the novel and to write solely to please his own artistic conscience, he carried with him a large disillusionment about the drama as an art form. And it is an interesting fact that almost the only unfavorable criticism of Ibsen expressed by James was in connection with the limitations imposed upon Ibsen as a practitioner of the unholy trade. It is in James's attempt to prove the superiority of the novel over the drama as an art form in his Preface to *The Awkward Age*, in which he deplores the limitations of the "poor theatrical straightjacket," that he finds Ibsen, when he is "clear," as in *A Doll's House*, "simple and superficial," and when he is "comprehensive and searching," as in the *Wild Duck*, "confused and obscure." But these defects are wholly due to the unfortunate "conditions" of the form he has chosen

<sup>22</sup> *Notebooks*, p. 100.



(p. xix). Otherwise, his admiration for Ibsen continues, and never more so than in 1896 when he was beginning the novels of the final period. On December 18, 1896, he writes to Elizabeth Robins: "Ah who will 'do' J. Gabriel? He's immense. What an old boy is our Northern Henry!—he is too delightful—an old darling!"<sup>23</sup> And, more soberly, in a critical article which appeared the next year in *London Notes*, he expressed his admiration for Ibsen's "rare mastery of form" by which he arrived at the dramatist's "great goal—intensity." "Never," James said, "has he juggled more gallantly with difficulty and danger than in this really prodigious 'John Gabriel.'" Never had Ibsen achieved a greater "artistic triumph."<sup>24</sup>

If we may assume that when James, after the dramatic interlude, returned to the novel as "the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms," with a perfected technique arrived at, in its final form, largely as a result of his experience as a dramatist, then the question arises: Which of the two techniques of the drama that he was familiar with during the dramatic years exercised the greater influence on the novels of the last period? Was it the well-made technique of Dumas, Scribe, and Sardou, or was it the naturalistic technique of Ibsen? Sardoudledom, surely, with its heavily plotted complexity, its marionette characters, its *coups de théâtre*, its frequent intervention of the author in the form of asides and *raisonneur* monologues—even in *Dumas fils* for whom James had a lingering fondness—was the direct antithesis of the ideals towards which James had long striven in his novels. As we have seen, what especially interested James in Ibsen, in his criticism of *Hedda Gabler* in 1891, was the precedence of character over plot ("saturated, above all, with a sense of the infinitude, for all its mortal savour, of *character*" . . . "the picture not of an action but of a condition . . . an *état d'âme*"<sup>25</sup>) and the objectivity of the new retrospective technique ("We receive Hedda ripe for her catastrophe, and if we ask for antecedents and explanations we must simply find them in her character"<sup>26</sup>). In Ibsen James discovered what he had long struggled to attain in the novel—the completely dramatic rendition of what is seemingly the reverse of dramatic—the essentially

<sup>23</sup> Robins, p. 184.

<sup>24</sup> Henry James, *Notes on Novelists* (New York, 1914), p. 426.

<sup>25</sup> *Scenic Art*, p. 251.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

static picture of a mind and soul: "... his drama is essentially that supposedly undramatic thing . . . the portrait of a nature," which, with his method, he makes "against every presumption, live with an intensity of life."<sup>27</sup> As readers of James know, the above is an accurate description of what James finally achieved in his last novels. The only action in which he had ever been interested was the action of character, and in Ibsen he found that kind of action dramatically and objectively rendered. The "scenic scheme" which James was later to attempt to impose upon the novel in its entirety was, as we know, an attempt to make the story tell itself in "self-lighted" scenes, with the elimination, as much as possible, of all interposition of the author, all "going behind," all the long-hated seated masses of information. The method was to find its fullest exemplification in *The Awkward Age* and *The Outcry*, experimentally, and later to yield to a modified form, the alternation of "picture" and "scene" in the last novels, with the picture a dramatic preparation, stage directions, for the scene. But it was the scene that James regarded as of primary importance, as R. W. Short has recently shown, and his ideal was that picture should lead so inevitably to scene that the reader should find it difficult to establish their limits.<sup>28</sup> By his use of picture James escaped from the limitations of drama, but utilized the possibilities of drama in the all-important scene. And the typical scene of the later novels maintains largely the "self-lighted" and objective quality that James had admired in Ibsen, and the lack of which he had deplored in Dumas *films* when he said: "He himself is the most vivid thing in every situation."<sup>29</sup> The advantages of the method it is unnecessary to elaborate, since that aspect of the subject has been thoroughly explored by Edgar, Beach, and Lubbock, but it is interesting to note that these scholars stress as a distinguishing feature of the final technique its attainment of the ideal of objectivity. As Beach says in *The Twentieth Century Novel*: "This is the great outstanding feature of technique since the time of Henry James, that the story shall tell itself, being conducted through the impressions of the characters" (pp. 15-16). And Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction*: "I do not know that anywhere, except in the later

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>28</sup> R. W. Short, "Some Critical Terms of Henry James," *PMLA*, LXV, 678 (Sept., 1950).

<sup>29</sup> *Scenic Art*, p. 275.

novels of Henry James, is a pictorial subject thus handed over in its entirety to the method of the drama, so that the intervention of a seeing eye and a recording hand between the reader and the subject is practically avoided altogether" (p. 185). It was this quality—objectivity—that James came to regard as the most important aspect of dramatic technique, as the Preface to *The Awkward Age* reveals: "The divine distinction of the act of a play—and a greater than any other it easily succeeds in arriving at—was, I reasoned, in its special, its guarded objectivity" (p. xvii). James here is obviously speaking of his ideas in the late nineties at the time he wrote the novel, and it seems a reasonable conclusion that he had in mind the naturalistic technique of Ibsen in which the characters tell their own story in their own words, rather than the well-made technique of the French school with its extraneous characters introduced to discuss the author's moral and social theories, or to acquaint the audience with the psychology of the principal characters, with its constant intervention of the author in asides and *raisonneur* monologues. Ibsen, as Bonamy Dobrée has said, was the first modern dramatist to solve the problem of objectivity.<sup>30</sup> In Ibsen, as Bradbrook states, ". . . there is no comment, no judgment, the audience is not asked to respond with a verdict, and this objectivity was not at all characteristic of the age."<sup>31</sup>

Leon Edel suggests that it was James's reworking into a novel of the scenario of his play, *The Other House*, in 1896, which demonstrated to him the possibility of applying, fully and consistently, the scenic method to fiction.<sup>32</sup> The suggestion is an interesting one in view of the fact that James at the time was apparently working almost simultaneously on *The Other House* and *The Spoils of Poynton*, the first published of the novels to exemplify fully the scenic method. It was the year, we recall, in which James declared that he realized "none too soon—that the scenic method is my absolute, my imperative, my only salvation."<sup>33</sup> The novel, *The Other House*, which Edgar says "reads like an Ibsen play with Jamesian amplifications,"<sup>34</sup> James was later to designate as "Oh blest *Other*

<sup>30</sup> Bonamy Dobrée, *Restoration Tragedy* (Oxford, 1929), p. 73.

<sup>31</sup> M. C. Bradbrook, *Ibsen the Norwegian: A Revaluation* (London, 1948), p. 117.

<sup>32</sup> *Complete Plays*, p. 679.

<sup>33</sup> *Notebooks*, p. 263.

<sup>34</sup> Edgar, p. 197.

*House*, which gives me thus at every step a precedent, a support, a divine little light to walk by."<sup>35</sup> Since *The Spoils of Poynton* was published first, it is impossible to decide which novel was actually written first, but it was the year in which James was working on both that marked the beginning of what Blackmur calls his "second life" as a novelist,<sup>36</sup> Edgar the "new formula"<sup>37</sup> and Richardson "a singular technique."<sup>38</sup> Edel in his introduction to the novel, *The Other House*, calls attention to its "retrospective method"<sup>39</sup> which eliminates the old preliminary exposition, an aspect of *Hedda Gabler* that, as we have seen, greatly interested James, and which was to become an integral part of the scenic method in the later novels, beginning with the *Spoils of Poynton*, in which, as Beach early remarked in his *Method of Henry James*, "the drama takes but two of the twenty-two sections to get in motion" (p. 96). Previous to 1896, in the earlier novels, from *Roderick Hudson* and *The American* down through *The Princess Casamassima* and *The Tragic Muse* James used the older, more expansive and spacious method of preliminary exposition. As Edgar notes in his *Henry James, Man and Author* with respect to *The Portrait of a Lady*: ". . . in his later period he would have launched his character more promptly. He would not have spent so much time in the dockyard constructing his craft. We should have learned of the strength of her structure by the way she glides over the water and takes the buffets of the breezes and waves" (p. 254). Beach in *The Twentieth Century Novel* says of *The Ambassadors*: "The story is well under way before we have finished the first chapter. Meanwhile the exposition is little by little accomplished, always in the most intimate relation to the story in its immediate present phase" (p. 192).

In his early review of *Hedda Gabler*, James had commented upon Ibsen's "curious and beautiful passion for the unity of time (carried in him to a point which almost always implies also that of place),"<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Notebooks*, p. 348.

<sup>36</sup> Richard P. Blackmur, in *Literary History of the United States* (New York, 1948), II, 1062.

<sup>37</sup> Edgar, p. 114.

<sup>38</sup> Lyon N. Richardson, *Henry James*, American Writers Series (New York, 1941), p. li.

<sup>39</sup> Edel, *The Other House*, p. xvii. The discussion of Ibsen's dramatic technique in the present essay is based on: P. F. D. Tennant, *Ibsen's Dramatic Technique* (Cambridge, 1948); Halvdan Koht, *The Life of Ibsen* (New York, 1931); Donald Clive Stewart, *The Development of Dramatic Art* (New York, 1928); and Bradbrook.

<sup>40</sup> *Scenic Art*, p. 251.

and it is interesting to note this aspect of the retrospective technique in the later novels, in which the characteristic “foreshortening” and restricted space of Ibsen in such plays as *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts*, and *Rosmersholm*, secures James the same natural and plausible extension of time and space. Although the drama in the Ibsen plays mentioned is actually enacted in a restricted time and space, much of the action took place in America, Paris, and on a European tour. Likewise, for example, in *The Ambassadors*, although the actual events of the novel are confined to a comparatively short period of time in Paris and its environs, much of the important action took place in Woollett, Massachusetts. As to the advantages of the method, Beach says, in his *Twentieth Century Novel*: “The limitation of time tends to produce the effect of the dramatic Now; the limitation of place, the dramatic Here” (p. 193). While it is true that James could have found examples of the retrospective technique in Dumas *films*, the fact remains that in his one critical article on Dumas he does not mention it, while there is every evidence, as we have seen, that he studied it in Ibsen. This is not to argue that James, previous to his discovery of Ibsen had never concerned himself with such problems, but rather to call attention to the fact that in Ibsen he found them “beautifully” solved, and that in *The Other House*, in play scenario and novel, he must have learned, practically, much about the technique of retrospective analysis.

The method of retrospective analysis threw added responsibilities upon the dialogue, and in both the later plays of Ibsen and in the later novels of James it became, in popular opinion, “enigmatic,” but actually, as we now recognize, more functional. Much of the external action having been relegated to the past, the drama dwelt, as James said in his review of *The Master Builder*, with “the supremely critical hour in the life of an individual, in the history of a soul.”<sup>41</sup> Thus much of the duty of direct narrative and exposition fell on dialogue, and to accomplish its functional purpose of carrying on the story and revealing relationships between characters it must rid itself of all superfluities, must realize more perfectly the ideal dialogue James had described in the Preface to *The Awkward Age*: “. . . really constructive dialogue, dialogue organic and dramatic, speaking for itself, representing and embodying substance

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

and form" (p. xiii). Without intending to suggest any direct influence, nonetheless it is an interesting parallel that the retrospective (and inevitably introspective) technique in both Ibsen and the later James had similar effects upon the dialogue of each: as the burden of exposition was thrown more largely upon dialogue it became more allusive, more suggestive and more significant, in that each speech was now more closely interlocked by implication to the total structure. Since "picture" and "scene" were so closely fused in the later James, not only the dialogue but his prose style in general carried a heavier load of suggestive detail. As Dupee says: "The urbane and relatively impersonal rhythms of his earlier style became more nervously responsive to currents of feeling. There are bizarre shifts of pace, unexpected brevities. . . . At the same time as the entire medium becomes denser and tauter, it risks parallelisms of sound and cadence which formerly would have been rejected as too poetic . . . remarkable metaphors . . ." by which "as Stephen Spender has said, 'there arise as from the depths the dream images of the subconscious.'"<sup>42</sup> Dupee and Spender might well have been describing the later style of Ibsen as the master builder probed more and more deeply into the secret recesses of human consciousness in such a play as *Rosmersholm*.

Both Ibsen and James in their later works, as they explored more deeply the human consciousness in such esoteric realms as the sense of the past and remorse of conscience, resorted to symbolism. Matthiessen has shown how, in the later novels, James expanded metaphors into symbols, "recurrent images of a thematic kind," the water images in *The Ambassadors*, the dove image in *The Wings of the Dove*, the golden bowl image in *The Golden Bowl*, the ivory tower image in *The Ivory Tower*.<sup>43</sup> Although, as Matthiessen remarks, James was fully aware of the newer French movement, he was no *symboliste*: ". . . he did not, like Mallarmé, start with his symbol. He reached it only with the final development of his theme, and then used it essentially in the older tradition of the poetic metaphor, to give concretion, as well as allusive and beautiful extension, to his thought."<sup>44</sup> James's symbolism was not

<sup>42</sup> F. W. Dupee, *Henry James*, The American Men of Letters Series (New York, 1951), p. 193.

<sup>43</sup> Matthiessen, *The Major Phase*, chaps. ii-v.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

the schematized, allegorical symbolism of a Hawthorne or Maeterlinck, nor was it the veiled and mysterious subjectivism of the contemporary French school. The symbols of both James and Ibsen, when the two great writers reached artistic maturity, whether their symbols were palpable or impalpable (and they used both kinds—the wild duck and the golden bowl, the white horses and the dove) were never used to veil or disguise meaning, but rather to give concretion to the subtle and submerged, the unspoken and the mysterious in the heart of man. In those fluid depths of consciousness where words as logical formulas, words as they are usually employed, fail, where one must go behind words to suggest by indirection the power of the unspoken, where the feelings are too elusive to be conveyed by words used in their ordinary senses, there both Ibsen and James resorted to symbolism. But in neither is it a schematized system forced upon the reader at the beginning of the work, but rather a sudden, skilful touch of the master's brush which strikes the imagination and invites it to explore the mysterious substratum of the human mind that lies beneath the spoken words. Both the golden bowl and the white horses of *Rosmersholm* make infrequent, though focal, appearances, and the reader is quickly back in the realm of conscious reality, having touched for a brief moment the twilight world of the subconscious. The method is the same in both Ibsen and James, although the symbolism of James is on the whole clearer, and is not characterized by the obscurity which James complained about in *The Wild Duck* and *The Master Builder*. In discussing Ibsen's symbolism in the latter play, James described the method as that of "a mingled reality and symbolism" which "gives us an Ibsen within an Ibsen."<sup>45</sup> James regarded *John Gabriel Borkman* as a "supreme example of the method" of "the sturdy old symbolist," and he welcomed it "with high wonder and pleasure."<sup>46</sup> It is not my purpose to claim that James's symbolism in his later novels was influenced by Ibsen—he might have been inspired by the new French school as Ibsen is supposed to have been—but merely to point out that James's symbolism is more like Ibsen's than like that of the *symbolistes*.

A distinguishing characteristic of James's later novels that has

<sup>45</sup> *Scenic Art*, p. 259.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.



often been pointed out by critics is what Matthiessen calls their "air-tight" structure, and Edgar their "exquisite proportions and unrelaxed tightness of technique." As students of James know, tight structure and symmetrical design in the novel had been ideals towards which the master had made measurable progress before the dramatic interlude. But only after his adoption of "the divine principle of the scenario" in 1895 did he fully achieve what Edgar calls "the kind of perfection he had long been striving for." If we examine the closely wrought, finely spun scenarios for such later novels as *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl* in the *Notebooks* we realize why they eventuated in that "firm ossature" which was James's aim. Since none of the play scenarios survive, with the exception of a portion of the unfinished scenario for *The Chaperon*, we are unable to compare the play scenarios with the novel scenarios. But we do have the plays, and they very obviously lack the absolute unity which distinguishes the later novels. Matthiessen says: "The inertness in form, so surprising to find in James, seems due most to his determination to meet existing conditions half way, a compromise that gained him nothing and that destroyed the tight structure which had come to distinguish all his fiction."<sup>47</sup> What the compromise that ruined the plays was, we know: it was James's persistent identification of the Scribe-Sardou technique with the "popular." As he wearily said after the failure of *Guy Domville*, "And I had tried so hard to meet them!" The *Notebooks* reveal that in his first tentative proposals for *The Wings of the Dove*, in 1894, he had actually, for a fleeting moment, considered the possibility of constructing the plot along the lines of the old complex intrigue-*ficelle* technique of Edmond About's *Germaine*, but had almost instantly rejected the suggestion. "But," he said, "I don't care for that."<sup>48</sup> As Matthiessen and Murdock remark, "When he finally brought it to expression, he had moved as far from the plays of Scribe as from any reminiscences of a plot of Edmond About's."<sup>49</sup> Austin Warren states: "Ibsen, whose *Hedda* and *Master Builder* he saw, about whom he wrote (in 1891 and 1893) with regard and discernment, gave him examples of fictional work the reverse of

<sup>47</sup> Matthiessen, *The Major Phase*, p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> *Notebooks*, p. 171.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.



improvisation.”<sup>50</sup> Certainly, as we have seen, this aspect of Ibsen had impressed James, from *Hedda Gabler*, “wrought with admirable closeness,”<sup>51</sup> to *John Gabriel Borkman* with its “rare mastery of form . . . so difficult to have reached, so ‘evolved,’ so civilised.”<sup>52</sup> This attainment of the Greek ideal of absolute unity and symmetry by Ibsen, frequently mentioned by critics, James was possibly the first critic, in English, to recognize, and he was likewise the first novelist to attain that ideal fully in the English novel. A comparison of *Rosmersholm* and *The Golden Bowl*, for example, reveals the same beautiful unity of design in both: in the play, the first half dealing with Rosmer, the second half with Rebecca, Act I with Rosmer’s present, Act II with Rosmer’s past, Act III with Rebecca’s past, Act IV with Rebecca’s present; in the novel, the first half dealing with the Prince, the second half with the Princess, with each book, or “act,” dominated by the central figure, in an absolutely objective, self-lighted scene. The artist’s prayer that James had uttered in 1896: “Let me not, just Heaven—not, God knows, that I *incline* to!—slacken in my deep observance of this strong and beneficent method—this intensely structural, intensely hinged and jointed preliminary frame”<sup>53</sup> had been answered by a final perfection of the scenic scheme and a new technique for the novel.

The master had learned many lessons in his long career—the lesson of Balzac, of Goethe, of Flaubert, of Turgenev, and of others—and perhaps not the least important of them all had been the lesson of Ibsen.

<sup>50</sup> Warren, p. 553.

<sup>51</sup> *Scenic Art*, p. 252.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.